

The Virtual Health Care Team™: an Example of Distributed Virtual Education

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The usefulness of professional teams in health care is well known. Teams help to develop protocols and standardize procedures.¹ The use of teams has also reduced complications, infections, length of stay, and costs.^{2,3} Although the value of health care teams is recognized in the literature, we are not aware of any web site that particularly champions the health care team approach.

In addition, although web sites link the user to web sites maintained by other institutions for more information, the links typically introduce ancillary information rather than information that is integral to the subject matter being taught.

Recognizing these twin voids, we have constructed the Virtual Health Care Team™ on the internet. This interactive site presents cases written from a health care team point of view, and the student is invited to click on links maintained by other sites for answers to the questions. The student uses the information from other sites to answer the questions which are processed by the computer for analysis and feedback to the student and to the instructor.

In the Virtual Health Care Team™ case on 'Breast Cancer' an adult female presents with a lump in her breast which is initially and erroneously diagnosed as benign. The student is asked basic facts, and is referred to data from the American Cancer Society as a source for the answers. Another question asking about risk factors has a link to Oncolink from which the student may learn information to answer the question about risk factors. Still another question about lymphedema has a reference pointing to a lymphedema site where the student may find information to answer the question.

Distributed virtual education allows authors to capitalize on extra-mural authoritative sources to incorporate in locally-produced educational programs.

In distributed virtual education, these authoritative sources may supply entire courses, or, as in this application, integral material to the lesson plan. The local author should verify the authenticity of the linked source, or should offer alternative links when experts disagree. There are also design and maintenance issues about outside links. Distributed virtual education may integrate various internet information services such as WWW, and communication services, such as email, mailing lists, and newsgroups to achieve educational goals. In addition it may incorporate principles of effective online communication and cooperative education. For instance, students may "turn in" their homework assignments to an FTP server, and newsgroups may serve as "classroom discussions."⁴ Distributed virtual education should include the instructional design factors of knowing the learners, incorporating established scientific principles for active learning, and evaluating continuously.

References

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